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Spain Pledged Citizenship to Sephardic Jews. Now They Feel Betrayed.

Nicholas Casey ⁝ 8-10 minutes ⁝ 7/24/2021

In 2015, Spain said it would give citizenship to the descendants of Sephardic Jews expelled during the Spanish Inquisition. Then rejections started pouring in this summer.

Credit...Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

Published July 24, 2021Updated July 28, 2021

MADRID — María Sánchez, a retired mental health therapist in Albuquerque, spent the past four decades tracing her Jewish ancestry from Spain. She created a vast genealogical chart going back nearly 1,100 years, which included three ancestors who were tried in the Spanish Inquisition. Her findings even led her to join a synagogue in the 1980s and to become a practicing Jew.

So when Spain's government said in 2015 that it would grant citizenship to people of Sephardic Jewish descent — a program publicized as reparations for the expulsion of Jews that began in 1492 — Ms. Sánchez applied. She hired an immigration lawyer, obtained a certificate from her synagogue and flew to Spain to present her genealogy chart to a notary.

Then, in May, she received a rejection letter.

"It felt like a punch in the gut," said Ms. Sánchez, 60, who was told she had not proved that she was a Sephardic Jew. "You kicked my ancestors out, now you're doing this again."

Image

Credit...Sharon Chischilly for The New York Times

Spain's statistics and interviews with frustrated applicants reveal a wave of more than 3,000 rejections in recent months, raising questions about how serious the country is about its promise of reparations to correct one of the darkest chapters of its history, the Inquisition. Before this year, only one person had been turned down, the government said. Some 34,000 have been accepted.

At least another 17,000 people have received no response at all, according to government statistics. Many of them have waited years and spent thousands of dollars on attorney fees and trips to Spain to file paperwork.

It remains unclear why the wave of rejections has come now. Spain's government said it was simply trying to clear out a backlog of cases. But lawyers representing applicants say they feel officials have had a change of heart on the program, which formally stopped taking applications in 2019.

For applicants, it has left a sense of bewilderment and betrayal.

Image

Credit...Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

Some saw citizenship as a way to make peace with the persecution of their ancestors by forming a link to their ancestral land. Others had more immediate concerns, seeing a Spanish passport as the best hope to escape dire situations in their own countries.

“For Venezuelans, it was a lifeline,” said Marcos Tulio Cabrera, the founder of the Association of Spanish-Venezuelans of Sephardic Origin, whose family of nine has received four rejections this month, with the rest still awaiting a decision. Mr. Cabrera, who lives in Valencia, Venezuela, a city crippled by economic instability and deadly gangs, said he spent nearly $53,000 to file the applications, depleting much of the family’s savings.

The rejections have angered officials in Washington, including Representative Teresa Leger Fernández, Democrat of New Mexico, who said she raised the issue both with the White House and the State Department after receiving complaints from applicants in her district.

“Their refusal is worse than if they didn’t offer citizenship in the first place,” Ms. Fernández said of Spain. “This is an example of how you don’t do reparations.”

In a statement, Spain’s Justice Ministry, which is in charge of the applications, said that it had done its best to follow Spanish law and that it was only natural it would have to turn down many cases.

Image

Credit...Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

Those who had met the requirements “are welcome again to their country, but similarly, those who don’t meet the requirements will see that their application is rejected just like they would be in any other process.”

The program began in 2015, when Spain’s Parliament unanimously approved a law that would grant citizenship to anyone who could show that they had a single Jewish ancestor who had been expelled during the Inquisition. Applicants need not be Jewish, the government said, and were not required to give up their current citizenship — but they would be asked to demonstrate that they could speak Spanish and pass a citizenship test.

“This law says a lot about what we were in the past, what we are today and what we want to continue to be in the future — an open, diverse and tolerant Spain,” said Rafael Catalá, the Spanish justice minister at the time.

Spain was once home to one of Europe’s most thriving Jewish communities, which for centuries produced major poets, historians and philosophers. Sephardic Jews or Sephardim, who originated from communities on the Iberian Peninsula, are one of the main Jewish ethnic divisions of Europe, along with the Ashkenazim, who thrived in Northern and Eastern Europe until their devastation by the Nazis.

Image

Credit...Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

In 1492, Spain's rulers, urged on by the Roman Catholic Church, gave the Spanish Jewish community an ultimatum: Convert to Catholicism or leave.

Those who left fled to as far as the Middle East, the Caribbean and parts of what would eventually become the United States. The Sephardic Jews, as they became known, held onto their traditions in some lands and hid them in others, passing them down to generations who were raised as Catholics.

It was a history that Arnulfo Ramírez, an emeritus linguistics professor at Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge, had long suspected his family was a part of. Both his paternal grandfather and father were circumcised, though neither could explain why, he said. Some family members had an indifferent attitude toward the Catholic Church.

Mr. Ramírez traced his family names back to a passenger manifest from a ship of descendants of Spanish Jews that left Seville in 1580. He presented his findings to the Or VeShalom synagogue in Atlanta, which gave him a certificate attesting to his Jewish ancestry that he took to a notary appointment in Spain.

Image

Credit...Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

Mr. Ramírez thought he had a good case for citizenship. The professor was made an officer in the Order of Isabella the Catholic, a Spanish decoration that includes knights and commanders, in the 1990s for his work on Spanish linguistics.

But he was wrong: In early July, he learned that both he and his daughter, who practices Judaism, had been rejected.

César David Ciriano, an immigration lawyer in the Spanish city of Zaragoza, said that until this year, it was almost unheard-of for applications to be denied after they had been submitted to the government.

This was because Spanish notaries — like the one Mr. Ramírez visited — acted as gatekeepers, approving an applicant's Jewish heritage certificates, genealogy chart and other documents, before an application was formally submitted. Government officials were not allowed to overrule the notary's decision, Mr. Ciriano said.

However, this year, officials suddenly began second-guessing the notary's approvals, he said. "This is the first time I've seen such illegal behavior from the government," Mr. Ciriano said.

Image

Credit...Emilio Parra Doiztua for The New York Times

The Spanish government in its statement said it had followed the law in enforcing the citizenship decisions.

Ms. Sánchez, the New Mexico therapist who was turned down in May, has a lawsuit pending against the Spanish government to appeal her case.

She ticks off names of ancestors like Bartolomé Romero, a Spaniard of Jewish descent who settled in New Mexico in the 1500s and is her great-grandfather from nine generations back. Her genealogical pedigree chart, more than 250 pages long, ends with an ancestor named Ancar III, who died in 902.

But she said the rejection by the government gave her pause.

“I had to sit down for a minute and think: ‘Well, who am I then?’” she said. “Where is my background? But I have a strong Sephardic background. I can say I am a Jew. This is me.”

José Bautista contributed reporting.

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